Oban Biodiversity Improvement Project

Oban, Scotland

SGN

BIG Biodiversity Challenge Award Category: Client Award

Project overview (50 words max)

In March 2023 we completed our largest biodiversity enhancement project to date at our site in Oban, Scotland. We undertook biodiversity actions aimed at increasing grassland, river and woodland biodiversity and created new habitats for a variety of species to make our Oban site their home.

What were the biodiversity conditions on site prior to the enhancement? (100 words max)

The site was very overgrown with lots of invasive weeds (Himalayan balsam). There was also lots of dead and fallen trees in the river and rubbish along the riverbank. Keystone Ecology conducted an assessment of the site using the Natural England Biodiversity Metric 3.1 calculation tool. The grassland (0.29 hectares) baseline condition was assessed as 'poor' with a score of 1 . Whilst the baseline condition of the woodland (0.52 hectares) was assessed as 'moderate' with a score of 2. Both grassland and woodland were assessed as having medium strategic significance.

What were the reasons behind this project? (100 words max)

At SGN we recognise the profound impact the environment has on the quality of life and wellbeing of our people and the communities we serve. We are helping to play our part in reversing the loss of biodiversity by committing land in our company portfolio to biodiversity enhancement projects that will improve local ecosystem resilience and achieve biodiversity net gain. We conducted a review of the sites we own to identify those suitable for biodiversity enhancements projects and this included our site at Oban, which is only one of 19 biodiversity improvement projects we have implemented so far.

Clearing the riverbank

Installation of red squirrel box

What were the biodiversity measures taken? (300 words max)

Woodland management was central to our biodiversity improvements at Oban. We planted over 170 new trees along the riverbank and open area to enhance the woodland diversity, including Alder, Aspen and Oak. Veteranisation of trees was also undertaken.

We carried out thinning and pollarding of Willow species to encourage a wider variety of age classes to come through and improve vertical structure. Arisings were recycled and stacked to create reptile refugia and deadwood for invertebrates and fungi (Approx. 0.522 Hectares).

We created a 2870m2 wildflower meadow to attract more insects, introducing Yellow Rattle as part of the mix due to its ability to allow other wildflowers to flourish (Approx. 0.287 Hectares).

Many new habitats for species were created by the installation of bird boxes for kingfishers, house sparrows and swifts and nesting boxes for red squirrels and pine martins. Bat boxes were installed on trees above three metres to further encourage roosting on the site.

The project included innovative actions such as building and installing an artificial otter holt within the riverbank to provide safe refuge and encourage breeding.

The site will be subject to ongoing site maintenance and will be resurveyed in July/August 2024 to determine how ecologically valuable the habitat created is and determine biodiversity net gain.

Through various internal communication channels, we ensured colleagues were kept informed of project progress and those located nearby were given the opportunity to see first-hand the improvements made on site. We also installed a sign at the entrance of the site to communicate the improvements made.

Process of installing artificial otter holt at riverbank

Sign at site entrance detailing improvements made

Further information (250 words max)

The project followed a step-by-step process which is used as a blueprint for our other biodiversity projects. In addition to the 19 improvement projects implemented so far, we have another 12 projects in the pipeline for 2024/25.

Process: Identify baseline biodiversity condition / Develop site specific improvement strategy / Carry out work / Implement ongoing site maintenance / Resurvey to determine improvements

Lessons learned for future projects include; ensuring regular site visits ahead of work commencing. There were 3 businesses which backed onto our site and had, in between site visits, generated rubbish which needed to be cleared prior to work commencing and took extra time and money we had not anticipated. We also want to ensure we engage with our people and the local community more. During our project at our former gasholder site in Windygates, Fife we engaged with the local primary school and the local community group (Kennoway Men's Shed) to build bug hotels. Going forward we will be looking for the potential opportunity to align our biodiversity projects with our employee volunteering programme to enable even wider impacts.

Project Team

- SGN Property Team – Led by Graeme Walker, Estates Coordinator
- Keystone Ecology

What was the motivation for carrying out the enhancement? (100 words max)

Everyone has a part to play in helping to stop and reverse biodiversity loss. Graeme Walker, our Estates Coordinator who managed the Oban site project and other projects, is an outstanding ambassador for biodiversity, continually sharing his passion and enthusiasm for the subject, and encouraging colleagues to participate and engage in our biodiversity projects. He most recently took the Environment and Sustainability Team on a tour of the Windygates site in Fife, to see first-hand the improvements made there.

Planting 172 Alder, Oak and Aspen trees

Graeme Walker, Estates Coordinator